1: Cohen E-4,5 (1956-1965) 1967 MS14 Kanuri MS14

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# The Life Cycle: From Birth to Death in Kanuri Society

THE HISTORY of Kanuri society, its family and household organization, and the other groupings described later in this book that make it into a system, are all activated and made real by the people who spend their lives in Bornu. Kanuri society, indeed any society, can be described by giving the major details of its organized social life. However, such a description uses as its units the roles and groups that make up each organization. The units (roles and groups) are separate parts of the system, but it is important to remember that roles and groups are stage settings for the behavior of real people who are born, grow up, love, hate, get married, grow old and die. Some are more successful, some less so, but the way in which they live a Kanuri life from beginning to end is what produces the energy, the continuity, and the change within the structure of their society.

Like people everywhere the Kanuri see a pattern in the life span of individuals. This is thought of as a series of stages or grades determined fundamentally by age and sex. Whether he or she be rich or poor, peasant, slave, or of royal blood these stages still apply and mark off a lifetime. Like age grades in all societies there is a rough correlation at each stage with that of physiological growth, maturation and decline. However, the specific factors of local geography and the adaptation to it, as well as their social complexity and culture history, have molded the grades into the specific set of life stages that can be called Kanuri. In the future, the forces of modernism will add their weight to this stream and produce changes in this traditional cycle. For the present, however, I want to present a picture of a Kanuri lifetime, as my informants report it and as I have observed it in Bornu, starting with gestation and ending with the death of an individual.

## Gestation

Kanuri men and women almost universally claim that having children is desirable for married couples, although charms that both promote and prevent pregnancy can be obtained locally from specialists. The culture norms on this point are

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842 183 quite explicit, and married couples are supposed to want children. Those few women who admitted to me, confidentially, not wanting children had very high divorce records, while all others conformed to expectations when asked specifically concerning their desire for offspring.

842 Traditionally the Kanuri believe that conception results from simultaneous orgasm during sexual intercourse. This information I got from older men who do not, however, know in any detail when or how often such an event actually takes place. Instead they reason that it has occurred when their wife reports a pregnancy.

843 [842] When a woman is over one month late in a menstrual cycle (a few said forty-five days) conception is suspected, and she begins to buy charms on the market to safeguard a normal gestation. During this initial period the husband and wife, ideally at least, should not speak of the pregnancy to anyone until at least the second menstrual period has been missed, and then only to their very close friends and relatives. Such talk, indeed any excess conversation about the pregnancy, is believed to be dangerous to the course and development of a normal pregnancy. Even during the later stages just before birth only very cryptic references are made by the parents when they refer to the coming event. Pregnancy, like a number of other occa- [984] sions in one's lifetime, is considered a very fragile time, a time when an individual is vulnerable to maliciousness from humans or spirits. Because it is difficult to know about such maliciousness, until after its effects are felt, it is better to avoid mentioning the susceptible circumstances.

[833] Sexual intercourse is continued throughout pregnancy since the Kanuri believe that such activity makes for an easier labor at birth by keeping the passage open and providing fluids for the child and the mother.

Although the Kanuri recognize the pregnancy period of nine months, the woman continues her normal work until the lying-in period is signaled by labor. On the other hand exceptions to the nine-month period occur, and some women claim to have been pregnant for years although no outward sign is visible. This latter condition is referred to as *bənji*, that is to say an embryo that will not come out of the womb. A woman may miss a menstrual cycle once and then become convinced that she has conceived. If her conviction holds she may, after menstruating again, diagnose the condition as a *bənji*. Missing a menstrual period, however, is not absolutely necessary for the diagnosis. Women who spoke of having *bənji* felt that any woman could have one, but they also agreed that in their experience the woman was usually older and either had not given birth for a long time or had had a completely infertile marriage history. Certainly many Kanuri women seem to be barren, and this cultural belief must help to assuage the disappointment of a hopeful but sterile woman. It may also serve to alleviate the loss of womanly role for an older woman who sees herself being replaced in her reproductive functions by her husband's younger wives.

## Birth

844 When the woman is about to give birth, she is assisted by her own mother if she is in the vicinity, or her mother-in-law if she is living with her husband's family, and sometimes by a specialist in midwifery. There are stories told about

161 has been declining in the present century. The Kanuri Empire
[175] had suffered final defeat at the hands of Rabeh's invading forces in 1890, and the countryside had been ravaged in the
[164] succeeding decade. Venereal disease appears to have spread
[842] widely throughout the population leaving in its wake a marked decline in fertility and a resultant decrease in numbers of
311 the Kanuri population. There is consequently little pressure
[37] for land to farm. Large stretches of brush country are unworked, and the denser sections, along old water-courses, are
136 veritable jungles of brush and thorn. Larger wild-life have long since disappeared from Bornu, forced out by many centuries of human occupation, but some of the denser section of thicket might well support them today. A small herd of elephants is reported around Gumsa, in Geidam District, and of course elephants can be found in the extensive marshes along Lake Chad, but by and large the only game one sees are gazelle, monkeys, and birds, including occasional ostriches.

361 The Kanuri are a sedentary, agricultural people, who live in villages and towns. The fields which they farm encircle their villages. They are never found living in dispersed home-
369 steads. A basic division exists between Kanuri village life and Kanuri life in the towns and cities. This division corresponds to the classic distinctions between folk and urban polar extremes. Urban life was present in pre-contact Kanuri culture
[162] and consequently is well integrated into Kanuri culture. In fact, the Kanuri cities of the eighteenth century were unques-

[GEIDAM]

Table XIb

Cases of Children Given Away

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Aristocracy | 2: | to FaYoBr after weaning<br>to FaEl5i after weaning |
| Koranic Malams | 1: | to MoMo after weaning |
| Canteen Traders | 1: | to cousin after weaning |
| NA Malams | 1: | to FaElBr (chibuna) after weaning |
| Kabuna | - | |
| Craftsmen | 1: | to neighbor (chibuna) after weaning |
| Talaka | 1: | to FaMo at age 4 |
| Low-status | 1: | to chibuna at age 11 |
| | 8 | |

median number of children= .75

mean number of children=1.33

nuri men in this sample have 57 living children. One hundred and eight children had been born to the group, but 51 of these have died. Because of the exceptionally high infant mortality rate, children are greatly desired and prized. In addition to malaria, which is the greatest killer of infants, an extremely high rate of venereal disease is present in Bornu, and a high percentage of those infected are sterile and unable to bear children. One factor in spreading venereal disease is the high divorce rate. Frequent divorce and remarriage spreads the disease throughout the population, and results in many sterile individuals who desperately want children. In their desire for children, they divorce and remarry, thus spreading the disease still further. In particular, if they marry a zogor they are

[GEIDAM]

In particular, if they marry a zogor they are less likely to have children than if they marry a kalə yaskə. This probably accounts for the high birth rate among the Koranic Malams (one has eight children; one has five); they have all married kalə yaskəs, so that neither they or their wives are likely to be infected. On the other hand, in the lower categories (kabuna, craftsmen, talaka) a majority of the individuals have had no children at all. Seven of the eight talaka have no living children. This is the group with the highest divorce rate, and when they remarry they invariably marry zogors (see Table VIII) so that the chances are high that either husband or wife will be infected and sterile.

Table XIb reveals that eight of the 57 children who survived were given away, and grew up in the household of another family. At first, this seems difficult to reconcile with the great love for children and desire to have children. However, those who have borne a child have indicated their ability to bear others. Children are frequently given to relatives who have no children of their own, and who are probably unable to bear children but want a child badly. It may be seen that children are given away to siblings of the parent, to the child's grandparent, or to the chibuna after whom the child has been named. Six of the eight were given immediately after the child was weaned; two were given away at later ages. Giving of children at later ages is related to frequent divorce. Since the child belongs to the father, he may send the child to his mother or father should he, the father, not have an adequate home at the time.

593 eating together) is dropped and the husband and wife often refer to each other by sibling terms.

593 565 In some cases, more often among the upper classes, if a mother and/or father are very young at the time of their first child, a mutual shame-avoidance should obtain between the parents and this child. [842] [853] Informants who knew of this custom (many lower class informants denied its existence) claimed that in such a case the young mother must be pushed and cajoled into giving her breast to the infant because she feels great shame in having given birth so early in her life. However, as soon as the parents have grown up somewhat and taken their place as adult members of the community, the shame-avoidance between them and their first-born dwindles to the more usual shame-respect held between children and their parents.

571 As indicated above, shame(nungu) is a general category which refers to restrictions on behaviour in interpersonal relations. [577] [834] In this sense it is generalised to include all good, proper and moral conduct, both in and out of the kinship system. An individual should feel some nungu whenever he approaches a woman in public and she should keep her eyes to the ground, her head covered, if possible, and only the most necessary conversation should pass between them. 576 [575] [264] These taboos are more stringently practised by members of the upper classes, although no man, regardless of class ever eats with a woman. All respect behaviour between the lower classes and their social superiors implies some nungu. Thus in the law court an individual must keep his head uncovered and bent down (a woman keeps her head covered and originally spoke through a window from another room), and remain on his knees with feet tucked under his robe and his knees forward. Or again, shoes must be re-

597 people in terms of his real father and mother. The following interview material illustrates these ideas in concrete terms.

[565] I asked Mallam Aba Kiari his opinion of the practice of giving away infants just after they were weaned. He told me that he, himself, had been given away. I asked if this was a good thing. "Oh yes, very, very good," came the reply. He estimated that about four or five out of ten children of the higher ranks of society had been given away after weaning, although he felt that among the peasants the number was much lower because they needed children in their compounds for the help they could give. He had been given to his father's full sister just after he was weaned. This was arranged before he was born. (The informant is the first of two children from the same union). He stayed with his aunt for about nine years, he always called her bama (Fa-Sis). Everyone always told him who his own mother and father were; they lived in the same town and he often went to visit them at their compound. He addressed the husband of his father's sister as ba'a or aba (father) but always knew that this man was a stranger to him and his family.

[601] I asked him why he thought it was a good thing to give infants away. He answered that it was a very good thing because — if you have a child or perhaps more than one, then your friend, or brother or sister, who have never been able to have any children, experience the joys of parenthood if they are given yours to raise. You lose nothing by doing this kind of thing, for the child is still yours and knows it. [842] Did he not receive his milk at the breast of your wife? Is he not the result of your own sexual intercourse?

597 603 "But most people give their children to its grandparents," I said. "Why is that?"

"Ah, because they (grandparents) love the child very much and will be kind and gentle to it. You are a father and the child must have shame and respect for you, but a very small child knows nothing of such things."

597 571 Whether or not Kanuri adoptions exist for the reasons given by informants, it is certain that they do create, maintain, and strengthen wider social relationships, giving them a solid basis for continuity through time. The links between two residence groups, either in the same kinship system or between different ones, are made concrete and real. The child, by living in intimate contact and having primary social relations both in his biological family and his adoptive family has widened his primary relationships and solidified a definite contin-